

# Generations of STEM:

# Bessie Coleman

## Stunt Pilot

Bessie was born in Texas to a large family. Her mother was an African American maid, her father a Native American sharecropper. While she attended college briefly, she dropped out, unable to pay, and went to beauty school in Chicago. Bessie heard tales of aviation from veterans returning from World War I and was intrigued. Both

of her brothers served in World War I and through them, she realized if she wanted to learn to fly, she would have to do so in France. No school in the US would take a woman, much less an African American.

Bessie learned French, and in June 1921 earned her international pilots license in France. She returned to fanfare in the US, performing in flight shows, giving lessons and encouraging women to learn to fly. She also used her platform to promote civil rights, refusing to fly at any location that would not equally admit African Americans through the same gates as other attendees. Sadly, she died at age 34 in an aerial accident caused by a wrench mistakenly jammed in the airplane controls. Bessie is remembered in an annual fly over by black pilots from Chicago, and the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club formed by a group of African American women pilots.



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